

Jim O'Sullivan and Ben Terris, *National Journal*

The Pentagon has had a decade-long business partnership with the NASCAR stock-car racing circuit that has been a boon to the sport. But amid the House's Republican-led frenzy to cut federal spending, some Democrats have made it a target, backing an amendment to the fiscal 2011 continuing resolution that would prohibit any of its funds going toward military sponsorships of stock cars.

Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., wants to pull funding for the Defense Department's motorsports marketing enterprise, despite longstanding NASCAR ties with the U.S. military and the large overlap between states where the sport is popular and those that have high populations of service personnel.

It is also a clear indication that Democrats think that the NASCAR voting bloc is not voting with them now or anytime in the future.

"It's just a waste of money," McCollum chief of staff Bill Harper told National Journal on Tuesday. "A complete waste of taxpayer money. The military shouldn't be in the business of sponsoring race cars, they should be in the business of fighting wars."

Harper said the Army spent \$7 million on NASCAR endorsements, down from \$11.6 million in 2009, and another \$5 million on drag racing, which would not be affected by the amendment. He said the Marine Corps, Navy, and Coast Guard all dropped their sponsorships of NASCAR in 2006.

Pentagon officials did not respond to requests for comment.

NASCAR came to occupy a niche in the country's political discourse during the 2004 presidential election, when "NASCAR dads" became the new "soccer moms." The term arose from microtargeting research that identified a swath of largely Southern white males who could be expected to back President George W. Bush's campaign, provoking another round of hand-wringing from Democrats that the demographic might be out of reach.

NASCAR has seized the link between the sport and service members. Ramsey Poston, NASCAR's managing director for corporate communications, pointed to 2009 statistics from Experian Consumer Research showing that 1 in 5 NASCAR fans has logged military service, and are more than 150 percent more likely to have served than nonfans. One in three service members are NASCAR fans, according to those figures, he said, and service personnel are more than 150 percent more likely to be NASCAR fans than civilians are.

"NASCAR fans are the kind of people who fight America's wars, which would put into question the wisdom of banning the military's ability to reach out to them," Poston said.

McCollum's chief of staff, however, isn't convinced of such a direct link or that sponsorship is a fiscal priority.

"Who is in Iraq or Afghanistan because they saw an Army car go around the track?" Harper asked. "We're in a fiscal crisis. There's an amendment on the floor to eliminate all funding for homeless veterans. How is it more important to fund race cars than to help the men and women who served our country?"

Late Tuesday, the Council for Citizens Against Government Waste -- not a traditional ally of McCollum, who is a member of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party -- announced its support for the proposal. Aides said the amendment's outlook was unclear. But as fiscal 2011 spending undergoes its most intense scrutiny yet, Democrats said programs like the military's marketing outreach should be ripe for trimming.

Rep. David Cicilline, D-R.I., acknowledged that his state is not considered NASCAR country, and that Ocean Staters in search of a race are likely to travel to New Hampshire.

"I think when you look at the kind of cuts we're going to have to make... advertising expenses by the military is an appropriate thing to be looking at very seriously," Cicilline said.